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## Collecting as an Art

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I

Snob appeal and bad psychology have hindered understanding the aesthetics of collecting. Theorists have tended to see collecting as a form of conspicuous consumption or obsessive-compulsive behavior, leading them to dismiss the possibility of any aesthetic value in collecting. These views of collecting as consumerist and neurotic are shortsighted. After considering two highly visible examples of the standard approaches, I offer an alternative view of collecting as an art.

For the critique of collecting as conspicuous consumption, consider, for instance, John Dewey, one of the earliest advocates of expanding our conception of art beyond the fine arts. <sup>1</sup> Despite his broad and inclusive conception of art, Dewey did not think collecting had any aesthetic value. He sought to redirect attention from the world of curators, critics, and collectors to an ordinary life infused with aesthetic experiences ranging from a "fire engine rushing by" to "the delight of the housewife in tending her plants" (p. 9). Given this outlook, it is surprising that Dewey dismissed the possibility of an aesthetics of collecting with the remark: "the typical collector is the typical capitalist" (p. 12). Dewey saw the pleasure of collecting as an "adventitious matter," that "simulates aesthetic values" (p. 14). For Dewey, collecting is linked to the museum concept of art, according to which the work of art is raised above and segregated from everyday life. It is through the process of collecting that works of art end up in

museums, mansions, **[End Page 148]** and warehouses. As the very means of this sequestration of art in our society, collecting seems at first glance to be no more than a symptom of the cult of the art object that Dewey was criticizing.

Dewey does not object to the museum itself as much as he objects to the reduction of art to the objects and performances found in museums and concert halls, and aesthetic experience to the occasions engendered by them. The consequence of the museum concept of art is a separation of what Dewey terms the "artistic" and the "aesthetic." By the artistic, Dewey means production, creativity and expression; by the aesthetic, he means consumption, appreciation and interpretation. We tend to see production or creation on the side of the professional artist; whereas the art-goer, or, for our purposes here, the collector, is the passive consumer of aesthetic experience. However, for Dewey, "the distinction between esthetic and artistic cannot be pressed so far as to become a separation" (p. 53). Though analytically distinguishable, the aesthetic and the artistic represent a unified process for Dewey. Creation and appreciation are two sides of a pragmatic-phenomenological whole. The awkward phrase "art as experience" unites doing and undergoing, creation and appreciation. <sup>2</sup> The fact that there is no standard term to capture the continuity of the aesthetic and the artistic illustrates how deeply entrenched the museum concept of art is in our habits of thought.

Dewey's rejection of the aesthetics of collecting may also be tied to his distaste for the elitism of high profile art and antiques collecting. Unlike his general theory of art, his vision of collecting was closely linked to the fine arts. While he must have marveled at the works that his friend, Albert Barnes, was assembling in his Merion, Pennsylvania mansion, Dewey probably also recognized that the collection was made possible by the patent medicine entrepreneur's great fortune. Despite the ubiquity of beachcombing and tag sales, the association of affluence with collecting is deeply ingrained. Though collecting is common, public attention is directed toward the collections of the elite. Glossy antiques and interior decorating magazines feature priceless collections set in the sumptuous homes of the super-rich. Interest in collecting becomes voyeurism into the lives of those who collect the most expensive and admired objects. In return, the collectors are tacitly seen as the dedicated custodians of a common culture. Yet collecting is as common as spare change or a walk on the beach. While few people have the cash to drop on a Chippendale card table, collectors can be found among all classes of people. Children collect, though the old **[End Page 149]** cigar box has been replaced by cast-off Tupperware. The ubiquity of collecting, not its perceived exclusivity, represents the real challenge for the theorist.

Those who lean toward a psychological approach have seen collecting as a sort of mental affliction, a neurosis or fetish. Many collectors refer to their pursuits in gentle self-deprecation as "obsessions." But how seriously are we to take such remarks? In academic circles, theorists enshroud these turns of speech in a fog of Freudian jargon. For example, Jean Baudrillard argues that what unites collectors is their fanaticism not so much for the objects themselves as for the compulsive seriality of collecting. <sup>3</sup> Since collected objects no longer serve any practical

function, they have no meaning outside the act of acquisition. It is pure acquisition, for Baudrillard, which defines collecting. Caught in the obsessional repetition of acquisition, the collector is forever seeking the next piece. On Baudrillard's formulation, the seriality of acquisition is the repetitive effort to cope with anxiety, infantile abandonment, or eventual death. In the act of acquisition, tension is released, yet, inevitably, satisfaction is short-lived and fulfillment illusory; so the serialist begins the cycle once again. Ensnared in the objects, the collector finds security at the cost of having lost all sense of the present, or of other people. Collecting is obsessive evasion of reality, in fact, neurosis:

The "retreat" involved here really is a regression, and the passion mobilized is a passion for flight. Objects undoubtedly serve in a regulatory capacity with regard to everyday life, dissipating many neuroses and providing an outlet for all kinds of tensions and for energies that are in mourning. This is what gives them their "soul," what makes them "ours"--but it is also what turns them into the décor of a tenacious mythology, the ideal décor for an equilibrium that is itself neurotic. (p. 90)

The consequence of this approach to collecting is that rather than opening up the world of collecting, the theorist effectively closes it down. With collecting seen as a neurotic obsession, it is difficult to build a rich, well-informed and constructive understanding of the activity itself. Its diversity and complexity nullified, collecting is reduced to accumulation, and the collectors to their neuroses. Collecting becomes no more than the distortion of some other legitimate pursuit or an illusory protection against forces beyond the individual's control. On **[End Page 150]** Baudrillard's view, it is difficult to see collecting as anything more than the anxious repetition of neurotic illusion, the lunatic fringe of consumer culture. However, seen in its complexity and richness, collecting may be one of the most highly developed forms of resistance to the empty repetition of acquisition and the illusory promises of the commodity. Being a collector means moving beyond the so-called phantasmagoria of the object to perceive, pursue, acquire, and enjoy objects with respect to a variety of potential values.

To give collecting its due is to see it as the complex world of wandering, hunting, rummaging, examining, selecting, bargaining, swapping, buying, preserving, restoring, ordering, cataloguing, completing, upgrading, researching, and displaying. (This is in no way meant to be an exhaustive list.) Collecting is less a world-denying regulation of neurotic life, than what Norbert Hinske describes as *Weltaneignung*, which translates roughly as "world-acquisition" or "world-appropriation" and means an attitude in which one lets oneself be enchanted by the world. Collecting, for Hinske, implies an attitude of adoration, amazement, and insouciant curiosity about the world. <sup>4</sup> In this way, it becomes a means of learning about and appreciating the world.

## II

Not all collecting may be thought of as artistic. There are countless merchandising schemes that exploit the desire for accumulating according to principle but expropriate the principle in order to profit from the collecting process. Collecting becomes a marketing tool and a means to spur on consumption. We find this marketing strategy in the collectible plates and figurines sold by the so-called private mints. Their "Holiday Heirloom Collections" and "Historic Commemorative Editions" feature "award winning" artists usually unknown outside the workshops of the company. Often, these pieces are advertised with vaguely impressive claims of being hand-crafted or hand-painted and come with nebulous assurances of investment value. The Postal Service also markets stamps directly to collectors. The collector can buy the stamps "pre-collected" in a completed series. Here Dewey's reproach is perfectly appropriate. Given the quantities of production and the number of collectors, the common belief that these items will significantly appreciate in market value is sadly mistaken. Perhaps the most disturbing example of pre-programmed collecting lies in the toy **[End Page 151]** industry, where dolls and their accessories are regularly organized in collectible series designed to leave children always asking their parents for another toy.

Collecting here is reduced to purchasing segments of a collection already constituted by the seller. Collecting becomes creatively original when the collector is engaged in defining what counts as collectible. Here, the collector is participating in the social construction of aesthetic perception. In fact, as Michael Thompson observes in *Rubbish Theory*, collecting is one of the ways that aesthetic and market value evolve. <sup>5</sup> When discovery and value-constitution motivate collectors, they may be best thought of as scavengers. Collecting as scavenging is an example of what Thompson calls "wilderness creativity," the discovery and creation of value where there was thought to be none (p. 149). Scavenging, in this sense, is an act of freedom, innovation, even dissent, which challenges reigning taste. For the scavenging collector, acquisition marks the moment in the creation of a collection when the object is lifted out of the category "rubbish" and into "collectibles." This transformation means that the object is now capable of appreciation, both economic and aesthetic.

By scavenging, I do not necessarily mean garbage-picking (though, at the same time, I don't wish to exclude it either). Scavenging is better thought of as a form of exploration or wandering. It is not surprising that Walter Benjamin, an avid collector and traveler, remarked that it was through his search for books that he unlocked the cities he visited. <sup>6</sup> The search for new acquisitions leads the collector away from the official consumer world of malls and tourist districts and toward the informal economy of flea markets, tag sales, and thrift shops. The reasons for which an acquisition may be appropriate vary. Perhaps the piece matches others in the collection. It may suggest a new direction for the collection or an upgrading of a certain portion of the collection. The new piece may be a perfect expression of a certain beauty that the other pieces of the collection only suggest but do not embody. Perhaps, there is something about this potential member that calls into question everything that has been acquired before, revealing an ignorance or blindness that went untended. The decision to acquire can have

a transformative effect upon the object as well as the rest of the collection. Through the new acquisition, the meaning of the collection as a whole is called into question. The stakes are real: my collection is the embodiment of my taste. It is my convictions rendered concrete in interrelated acts of acquisition. Each one represents a decision that **[End Page 152]** forever alters all the others. Thus, when collecting is involved (as a medium, one might say), taste-formation proceeds by the decision to acquire.

To collect is to create a class or genre whose meaning resides in the way the pieces in the collection call attention to one another. By understanding the dialogue between members of a collection, we discover the aesthetic attitude of the collector, what the collector wants to show us about aesthetic perception and the world. For example, a collection of chairs including Marcel Breuer's Wassily chair calls us to see that famous chair differently than had it appeared in a collection of modern furniture or in a collection of objects with tubular steel construction. So long as the collection is still living, that is, still capable of being added to, the point of view is subject to change--to evolution and refinement, or, on the other hand, to repudiation and revision. The originality of the collector resides in this transformation of perception in the continually unfolding process of collecting.

The dynamism of the collecting process points up another shortcoming of the fetish-paradigm of collecting, namely, the static conception of the collector. For Baudrillard, the recurring impulse to collect is rooted in a desire to stave off change and thus to restore a sense of security. Collecting is an attempt to avoid growth rather than a means of growing. But this vision of collecting is bankrupt not just because it fails to accord to the collected object a meaning apart from repetitive acquisition but also because it fails to see in the process of acquisition any signs of the evolution of the collector. We are blinded to the role collecting can play in the aesthetic cultivation of the individual.

In contrast to the traditional artisanal concept of art-making, collecting shapes aesthetic perception without shaping the material that is perceived. In other words, collectors do not make things; they classify them through acquisition. In acquisition, the objects come together to form a larger entity, the collection itself. The members of a collection are usually displayed together. While it might seem inessential that the pieces of a collection are displayed in one place, I think the fact that they almost always are remains telling. For it is through display that the collection comes to take on an artifactual power of its own. In other words, a certain solidity of identity begins to accrue to it. Displayed together, the members become an object of aesthetic perception. Perhaps this is why true enthusiasts live with their collections whereas speculators are content to let them sit in warehouses. Taste cannot be an artifact, but through the collection, the taste of its creator becomes **[End Page 153]** accessible to others, open to appreciation and criticism, and perhaps an influential role in the aesthetic and creative lives of others.

The difference between the creativity of the traditional skill-based artist and the creativity of the scavenging collector is that the traditional artist has transformed material to make the objects: taste-making occurs through

form-making. The scavenger's originality resides in the appropriation and organization of found objects, either natural or human-made: taste-making here is through form-appropriation. But it is no less a giving shape to the world. As an artistic technique, the use of found materials is now utterly conventional. Rather than the intractable puzzles about the definition of art that most philosophers see in ready-made art, the most significant contribution of such art to contemporary culture is the rendering visible of that form of artistry that is most distinctly embodied in collecting: taste-formation.

### III

Collecting is a means of the aesthetic cultivation of the individual. Typically, the notion of cultivation conjures the image of a snooty connoisseur spewing esoteric knowledge of dusty portraits, rancid wines, and drafty houses. The strong odor of snobbism that envelops cultivation is unfortunate. The snob's perceived monopoly on matters of cultivation and the attendant discrediting of the term reflect a vision of culture restricted to a narrow class of objects and endeavors and, so, to a narrow place in our lives. To judge by its roots in the Latin, *colere*, meaning "to care for," cultivation is the practice of taking care of oneself, of tending to one's affairs, as Voltaire advised, as one would attend to a garden if it is to yield fruit. By *cultivation*, I mean here a pursuit or enterprise, involving both contemplative and creative moments, within which individual taste or sensibility develops. Cultivation is essentially a process: we do or make things in order to have experiences which then, internalized through habit and reorganized and redirected upon reflection, serve as the basis for further doing or making and still more refined experiences. The temporal dimension of cultivation is especially evident in collecting, where each acquisition redefines the collection by casting a new light on past acquisitions and suggesting possible directions for future ones.

Charles Wegener writes that cultivation (what he calls, invoking Kant, the "discipline of taste and feeling") requires us to distinguish, by reflecting upon an experience, what satisfies perception. <sup>7</sup> This satisfying [End Page 154] aspect is to be distinguished not only from what is dissatisfying but also from other satisfactions that may distract from the one we are most interested in cultivating. This norm of the reflective clarification of experience guides the questions we ask ourselves about the experiences we have. By distilling one aspect of experience, we render it more vivid for present and future experience. Of course, cultivation can collapse into snobbism when the individual seeks to close off possible experiences in the name of the distillation of personal taste. But cultivation requires not so much that we hide our eyes from experiences that do not fit our canon as much as it means that we must recognize, discriminate, and relate them to those that do. In this way, our canon, indeed, our very capacity to experience and appreciate what the world offers, may grow. As Wegener writes, "the 'practical' problem for a discipline of taste and feeling is that of stabilizing the integrity of a certain kind of discrimination and satisfaction not to be confused with other, equally valid interests, satisfactions, and appreciations" (p. 66). The

point is not that there is a single highest aesthetic value but that whatever is valued is discriminated from other values for the sake of sharpening and broadening aesthetic perception. To honor an activity is to avoid confusing its virtues with others that may intermingle with them. The development of taste--its coherence and expansion--is facilitated by this precision. A carefully assembled collection represents an exercise in cultivation. Collecting is one means of defining, reflecting upon, refining and developing personal taste. In the context of a carefully assembled collection, each act of acquisition marks the evolution of taste and, as such, the aesthetic evolution of the collector. It becomes a statement of aesthetic value, a work of art. Collecting shows us that art-making may be taste-making and taste-making may be artistry. Dewey's lament that the creative and appreciative poles of art are artificially bifurcated in the institutional categories of artist and spectator finds a response where he would have least expected it.

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## Notes

- [1.](#) John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), vol. 10 of *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).
- [2.](#) "We have no word in the English language that unambiguously includes what is signified by the two words 'artistic' and 'esthetic.' Since 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production and 'esthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate." Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 53.
- [3.](#) Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968), trans. James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1997). Now over thirty years old, Baudrillard's analysis continues to have a firm hold on the thought of theorists. In a recent anthology of new writing, it served as the keynote essay. See Jon Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995). See the review by Nick Wadley, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 35 (1995): 299-300.
- [4.](#) Norbert Hinske, "Kleine Philosophie des Sammelns," *Lebenserfahrung und Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1986), p. 88. The list is also adapted from Hinske.
- [5.](#) Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- [6.](#) Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969),

p. 63.

[7](#). Charles Wegener, *Discipline of Taste and Feeling* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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